

The First Versified Biography of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in English

Dr. Muhammad Sultan Shah

Abstract

The biography of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has been written by a large number of Muslim scholars. Some non-Muslim writers have also penned the life of the Holy prophet. Poets have composed poetry in his praise describing important events of his life. Shaykh Abd al-Rauf Luther was a poet who wrote the first versified biography of Prophet Muhammad in English. He was not a born Muslim and embraced Islam in his early age. His books "Epic of Faith" manifests poet's love and veneration for the Prophet of Islam. In this article, besides his introduction, his poetic work especially his versified biography of the holy Prophet, has been studied in details.

Shaykh Abdur Rauf Luther was not a born Muslim. He was born to a Sikh/Hindu family. His parents were Sikh and Hindu. His real name was Munshi Ram. He was born in 1916 in Sialkot District. A.R Luther had a special love for his homeland and he told about his date and place of birth in the following lines:

In Sialkot District of Punjab,
Where hearts of warrior, learned throb,

Which is the soul of Pakistan;

In nineteen-sixteen I was born(1)

He embraced Islam at the age of sixteen years according to the information published in newspapers on the occasion of his assassination but it seems that he embraced Islam when he was more than 16 years old. He was pulled into the realm of Islam by some invisible power and he left his home as well as his family for the greatest and benevolent house of peace. His journey to Islam was the result of special blessings of a saint whom people did not know nor he posed himself or declared as such. Actually this saint was a gardener who transmitted to this non-Muslim boy some word to recite while keeping his feet in water on the bank of a canal. He practised it for forty days. After it, the gardener said, "now you have been declared successful".(2)

He appeared in his Matriculation examination in 1931, and so he thought that he would pass the examination. After a few days, the result was announced and he was declared successful. He took some sweets to the gardener who ate it smilingly and then said, "the real result will appear after two years. I am happy that you have passed that examination as well. May Allah bless you!". (3)

Shaykh Abdur Rauf has talked about his studies at various institutions. He got early education at Jallundur in the East Punjab (India). Then he studied at Government College Hoshiarpur and later on he got admission at Sadiq Egerton College Bahawalpur and passed his F.Sc. examination. According to Dr. Sahibzada Anwar Ahmad Bugwi, Munshi Ram was a student at S.E. College Bahawalpur during 1933-1934.

Sahibzada Abdul Ghafoor Bugwi was his class fellow. Both started attending the Dars-e-Qur'an by Prof. Muhammad Afzal of the College. He once visited Bhera alongwith his friend Abdul Ghafoor Bugwi and met his father Maulana Muhammad Yahya Bugwi before his conversion to Islam.(4) Shaykh Abdur Rauf has beautifully composed the following lines regarding his education and conversion:

School to school, College to College,
As my future could acknowledge,
From place to place I knowledge traced,
Then, all alone, Islam embraced (5)

Shaykh Abdur Rauf has not mentioned where and when he embraced Islam. Dr. Anwar Ahmad Bugwi has mentioned that he embraced Islam at the hand of Maulana Muhammad Yahya Bugwi and his name was changed from Munshi Ram to Abdur Rauf after the name of Maulana's deceased son. (6)

After taking his F.Sc. examination at S.E. College Bahawalpur, he went to Taunsa Sharif. There he received commands by a saint in his dream to go to Sial Sharif and to meet the saint Hadrat Khawaja Qamar ud-Din Sialwi. So he went to Sial Sharif (District Sargodha) and Khawaja Qamar ud-Din was much pleased to see him. He remained with him for two months. Then Khawaja Sahib directed him to move to Bhera (District Sargodha) and get some religious education from Maulana Muhammad Yahya Bugwi. Abdur Rauf started his religious education but only a month had passed when his father, brother, uncle and some religious leaders of Hindu, Sikh and Christian communities approached the Maulana and asked him to hand him over to them to take him to Lahore.(7)

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According to Dr. Bugwi, Abdur Rauf's father was a Hindu lawyer and president of Indian National Congress of his area and his brother was a doctor at Civil Hospital Daska (Sialkot) who after partition served as a Civil Surgeon in Delhi.(8) According to A. Rauf's son Javaid, his grandfather was a Sikh. (9) He reached Bhera and came to the mosque. He met Maulana Zahoor Ahmad Bugwi (1900-1945) who was brother of Maulana Yahya Bugwi and requested to meet his son. Maulana Zahoor Bugwi talked to his brother and permission was granted for a meeting only in the presence of a guard to ensure that Abdur Rauf is not harmed by his father. His father tried his best to convince his son but he refused to go along with them on the ground that he was a Muslim and his parents were Sikh and Hindu. After a long discussion it was decided that open discussion would be held and he had to prove to their consolation that Islam was the best religion. The Maulana feared for he thought that Abdur Rauf was quite ignorant of Islam as he was a new convert. But his conviction was strong. He had faith in Almighty Allah. Therefore Abdur Rauf agreed on the condition that if he was defeated in the discussion, he would accompany them, and if they were defeated they should embrace Islam. So a Munazira was held the very next day. It took six days to discuss all matters. Abdur Rauf explained them the religion of Islam with particular reference to the personality of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) He was able to reply all the questions which those religious leaders put forward and then he counter questioned them which they were unable to answer. On the seventh day he gave a resume of the six days discussions and they were convinced that Islam is the true religion and their religions were not to the standard of Islam. (10)

He asked them to embrace Islam as they had agreed to it but they advanced lame excuses. Now they did not dare to ask the Maulana to hand him over to them. So they returned in failure. (11)

The father of Abdur Rauf tried his best to incite trouble. The Hindu newspapers like "Milap" and "Partab" published statements issued by him. He alleged that his son was forcibly converted to Islam. Sahibzada Abdul Ghafoor Bugwi published reply of this baseless charge in the daily "Zamindar" and "Siyasat" Lahore. Abdur Rauf did not care for anything.(12) He endangered his life only for the truth and preferred Islam to his blood relation as he himself has pointed out:

Abandoned every thing for God,

I was on voyage to my Lord.

After some time Abdur Rauf returned to Sial Sharif. He remained for about nine months in the service of Khawaja Qamar-ul-Din Sialwi (1906-1981). He requested Khawaja Sahib many a time to teach him to recite the Holy Qur'an. But every time he kept quiet. Once during the month of Ramadan, he asked Abdur Rauf to open the Holy Qur'an and listened to him as he spoke from his memory because he was Hafiz-e-Qur'an. Only once he read and that was enough. He was sure thereafter that he could read it of his own. The only lesson that the revered saint gave him has been described by him in the following words:

"Love of the Holy Prophet is most essential and I should
care to rear it in my heart."

Khawaja Muhammad Qamar-ul-Din Sialwi was a religious scholar and famous mystic of Chishtia silsilah (order). He once made Abdur Rauf to sit

in front of him and asked him to look into his eyes. He did not know what happened but certainly felt something pouring in his heart. Thereafter, he repeated the same lesson from eyes to eyes and eyes to heart. That was the end of his lesson. Khawaja Sahib asked him to go to Lahore and continue his studies. (13)

Abdur Rauf was a poet of English language. It seems that he had studied the prose and poetry of great English poets like Shelley Keats, Wordsworth, Byron, Shakespeare, Milton and Chaucer that helped him to become a good poet of English language. He himself says:

To me is Shelley dear friend,
 And think of Nature, heaven blend;
 Keats and Byron, Wordsworth, Shakespeare,
 Helping me and Milton, Chaucer.
 About his poetry, he has composed the following couplet:
 Rhyme and Rhyme which I have cover'd,
 Composed I poems when over-powered (14)

Shaykh Abdur Rauf served in the Press Information Department, Government of Pakistan and retired as Assistant Director. He had an opportunity to work as secretary censor board. He led a troublesome life. About his service he has composed the following lines:

In servitude my life was hired,
 Until with honour I retired;
 Serving Army and the Civil,
 Now I keep my dainty vigil. (15)

On September 2, 1988 Abdur Rauf was assassinated by an

unidentified young man. It so happened that two young persons came to his house situated inside Bhati Gate a day before. Both the young boys asked him why he had blasphemed the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in his book. Shaykh Abdur Rauf responded in negative and clarified, "that is another Luther who has done blasphemy" Later on, they expressed their desire to buy his book entitled "Muhammad: Wisdom of Life" but they could not do so due to shortage of money. They promised to come on next day. One of them came on 2nd September, 1988 and attacked him with a dagger as he was all alone in his apartment. He was rushed to hospital for treatment but he could not survive due to severe injuries and died in the hospital. (16)

Shaykh Abdur Rauf Luther composed numerous verses especially on Sufism. "Epic of Faith" is actually first versified biography in English. In the beginning, the following poem has been included which is a beautiful piece of poetry. Other versified biographies include "Cradle to Cross, Jesus Christ", "Lotus of Love, Lord Buddha" and "Ali the Divine Inspired Soul".

A Humble petition to the crown of creation, The Prophet of Islam, Mercy for every nation

This poem is actually the translation of Maulana Altaf Husayn Hali's poem "Ard-e-Hal" (عرض حال) but A.R. Luther has not mentioned anywhere that the thought is not original; rather it has been derived from Hali's poem. There is one main difference between the poems of Luther and Hali. Hali's poem contains 63 couplets but Luther's poem comprises 58 stanzas. Sayyed Zafar Husayn Bukhari has alleged A.R. Luther for plagiarism. (17) The charge of plagiarism is affirmed by the comparison of these two poems. A comparison has been made by quoting some couplets of

Hali and stanzas of Luther below:

اے خاصہ خاصانِ رسل وقتِ دعا ہے
امت پہ تیری آکے عجب وقت پڑا ہے (۱۸)

O' Noble of the noblest,

Now's time to bless the nation;

Ye Crown of every Prophet,

Faithfuls are in dejection. (19)

جو دین بڑی شان سے نکلا تھا وطن سے
پردیس میں وہ آج غریب الغریبا ہے (۲۰)

The Faith which had sprung up,

In native land with radiance;

Humble in foreign set up,

Shorn of its sweetest elegance (21)

جس دین کے مدعو تھے کبھی یزر و کسریٰ
خود آج وہ مہمان سرائے فقرا ہے (۲۲)

The Faith which had invited,

Magnificent Kings and emperor,

Today is only vested,

With rotten huts of poor. (23)

وہ دین ہوئی بزمِ جہاں جس سے چراغاں
اب اُس کی مجالس میں نہ بتی ہے نہ دیا (۲۴)

The Faith which was the fountain,

Of love and truth for nation;

No wick, no lamp, no action.

Bereft of all attraction. (25)

گر بد ہیں تو حق اپنا ہے کچھ اور زیادہ
 اخبار میں اصلاح لی ہم نے سنا ہے (۲۶)

If worst we are of all men,
 Our claim then uppermost;
 As heard we have you mention,
 The broken hearts you love most. (27)

The last line is not correct translation of "اصلاح لی" which may be rendered into English as "The sinful is for me."

جو دین کہ تھا شرک سے عالم کا نگہبان
 اُس کا نگہبان اگر ہے تو خدا ہے (۲۸)

The Faith which had protected
 People from polytheism;
 Save God, is no unsheltered,
 None to guard from any ism. (29)

فریاد ہے اے کشتی امت کے نگہبان
 بیڑا یہ تباہی کے قریب آن لگا ہے (۳۰)

O' Saviour of the Ummat's ship,
 We are in lamentation;
 For, the fate has drown the ship,
 To verge of its destruction (31)

کر حق سے دعا امت مرحوم کے حق میں
 خطروں میں بہت جس کا جہاز آ کے گھرا ہے (۳۲)

O' merciful! Pray to God,
 For those who are now misled;

Their ship has been surrounded,
By dangerous perils - all dread. (33)

اُمت میں تری نیک بھی ہیں، بد بھی ہیں لیکن
دلدادہ ترا ایک سے ایک ان میں سوا ہے (۳۳)

There are good and bad in them,
All members of your nation;
It is true each one of them,
Lits his heart with y'r affection. (35)

The themes of lines composed by Luther is derived from Hali's Urdu poetry which is evident from the comparison of Hali's Urdu couplets and Luther's quoted above.

Seerah of Prophet Muhammad(PBUH)

The poet has composed beautiful verses pertaining to the life of Prophet (Seerat-un-Nabi) that is spreaded over more than 200 pages (p.21-222). In the beginning he has written 15 stanzas under the title "To My Reader".

The Picture of Muhammad's life,
Portray shall I in words of life,
Enshrined is he in numerous books,
Which people read to happier looks.

Authentic version I shall offer,
For intelligent, average reader,
Not all incidents or feature,
But the salient and the sweeter. (36)

Luther explains the birth-place of the Holy Prophet(PBUH) in the following lines:

Mecca is the Ummul Qura,
Mother of the towns of Arabia,

In sterile valley Mecca lies,
No cultivation can surprise;
No wells, no trees, no dates gardens,
No valley green, no fruit orchards. (37)

The poet praises the family and forefathers of the blessed Prophet Muhammad in the following lines:

Distinguished members of Quresh,
Were privileged powerful Quresh.
Custodian of Holy Ka'ba,
Was the virtuous head of Mecca.
The oligarchy of the chiefs,
Were leading members of the house.
Of kossay to have full control,
Functions - religious, political.
But now entrusted Ka'ba's keys
To a man of Abdul Dar's house.
The wells of Zamzam with Hashims,
To maintain law were the Tayarns;
But Abdul Muttalib was man,
Of influence, character firm.

He was the eminent chief of all,
His dignity was loved by all,
He was at the height of power,
He was acknowledged far and near. (38)

About the father of the Holy Prophet(PBUH) Abdullah bin Abdul
Muttalib, Luther says:

His favourite son was Abdullah;

Most handsome, lovely Abdullah;

And once he thought of sacrifice,
For God of Ka'ba, for love to rise.
Said some chieftains of Quresh,
"To compensate kill in his place,
One hundred camels, but to save
Abdullah's life, the charming boy. (39)

After describing the conditions of the Age of Ignorance (the
Jahiliyya Period), the poet tells about the birth of Muhammad(PBUH)

It was the time Muhammad born,
Mercy for universe was born. (40)

The poet further describes some events connected with the birth of
Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the following lines:

Baby - Prophet in prostration,
With first finger towards heaven;
Played on lips, 'There is one God,
Muhammad is His Prophet-lord; (41)

The birth of great men is always accompanied with some

extraordinary events and miracles in case of the prophets. The poet has described the miracles associated with the birth of the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) as follows:

Pinnacles of Kisra fell,
The Parsis five had lost its spell;
The whole of universe was in swing,
For fairies its pleasure to sing.
'The Crown of Universe is come,
The gates of heavens are open;

The house of Hashims was now lit,
By light of heavens bit by bit. (42)

Luther further articulates some more miracles:

On the night of Muhammad's birth,
Palace of Kasra shook in mirth;
Its fourteen pinnacles fell to break,
Palace was rocked by an earthquake;
Persian's sacred fire extinguished,
Which unintermittingly burned,
From such a time immemorial,
Without any assignable
Cause. Suddenly, Officiating priests
Saw strange visions in its retreats.
The lake of Sala, too, was dried,
The vanishing darkness sobbed and cried. (43)

Abdul Muttalib was asked about the name of newly born baby. The question and his reply is poetically described as follows:

And lo! He spoke aloud and said:
I've named grandson as Muhammad,
To a question as he was asked
By some guests about the lad.

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He is the hope, so is such name,
Excel he shall in fortune, fame. (44)

According to the practice of Arabia, new-born Muhammad (PBUH) was entrusted to foster-mother, Halima, of the tribe of Hawazin, to be reared in the pure atmosphere. The poet has described it in the following lines:

Amena was informed in dream,
The babe would be suckled by one
Of the tribes of Abu Zuhayb,
So heard Halima of that babe,
Surprisingly. She rushed to place,
And there she went the babe to trace.
So as soon as she got the child,
Abundant milk suddenly flowed
In her breast and in her camel,
Her thin lean ass was now marvel;
Her cattle were now growing fat,
So happily she did relate. (45)

The poet has composed beautiful poetry pertaining to the Prophet's

earlier years:

In Mecca born posthumous child,
When he was six his mother died;
Lo! There he was doubly orphan,
Abdul Muttalib was his guardian;
He too died two years after,
Without protection, shelter there;
Abu Talib was his guardian now,
He was his uncle, to love brew. (46)

When a war broke out between Quraysh and Hawazin, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) helped his uncles. As this war began during the sacred months, therefore, it is called war of Fijar or the sacrilegious war. A.R. Luther says:

In twentieth year occurred war,
Notorious called Harbal Fijar;
Muhammad, in it took no part,
Except to gather arrows discharged. (47)

The Holy Prophet adopted the profession of trade because his forefathers were businessmen. The poet tells in a poetic way:

Lo! Now he is a camel driver,
Silent, simple, righteous, purer;
Khudija picked him up for trade,
She fortune had of magnitude;
She was widow but business ran,
She was the princess of her clan;

To serve a widow, he was pleased,
Efforts for business he increased. (48)

On the eve of Prophet Muhammad's marriage to Khadija bint Khuwaylid, Abu Talib read the sermon of Nikkah that has been narrated by A.R. Luther as follows:

"The benediction of greatest God,
Creator, Sovereign, lovely Lord;
All praises are to God alone,
Make up posterity of Abraham;
And Ismael, his son, and gave
Us sacred land and made us brave.
We are the guardians of the House,
A pilgrimage for all Arabs;
We are the judges of all men,
May he be beduin, kith and kin.
Muhammad the son of Abdullah,
My nephew, with grace of Allah,
Surpasses every man in looks,
He has no stain of any books.
In virtues, in intelligence,
Khudija loves him with her heart
He reciprocates on his part;
So I unite them now together,
A pair fine each other's shelter.
To celebrate marriage declare:

What is essential for dower,
Responsibility I undertake,
Ye come, we marriage celebrate. (49)

The biographers of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) tell that he resolved the dispute aroused over the installation of the Black stone (Hajr-e-Aswad). When the Holy Ka'ba was being rebuilt by all clans of Quraysh. Luther says in this regard:

"Ka'ba they had reconstructed,
And Hajre Aswad to be studded;
The right of handling sacred stone,
Created rift in every town;
The tribal chiefs at length discussed,
And then agreed whoso entered
The temple first the morning next
Abide by his decision best.
It happened there Muhammad came,
Spread the carpet called for men,
For every tribe to lend a hand,
Consolation for all concerned. (50)

The poet underlines the first revelation that the Holy Prophet (PBUH) received in the cave of the Mount Hira as follows:

Thereafter voice requested me,
'Repeat what I speak to thee.'
I knew not what I had to say,
I knew not what to him convey.

'In name of God, the Sovereign Lord,
The God who made man out of clot
Of blood. Taught him what he knew not. (51)

Thereupon, Khadija consoled her husband. The poet further describes the event as follows:

It happened when I was awake
Khadija said: God won't for sake
He loves you, He will never part
You from the truth. Ye good at heart.
Promise ye keep, ye are honest,
Generous and kind, shy but modest;
Dear husband! Be of good cheer,
Allah has chosen Prophet dear. (52)

After the death of his uncle Abu Talib and his wife Khadija, the Prophet of Mercy (PBUH) went for his heavenly journey called ascension (mi'raj). Luther says:

By grace of God Muhammad started,
Journey from his house, awaited.
At night he traveled by Buraq,
From sacred Mosque to farther Mosque,
Precincts of which were bless'd by God,
Transported Prophet in a nod,
With soul and body to the Throne -
Sublime, Eternal, Gracious Throne.
Mysterious it may look to man,
But it did happen in a span. (53)

When the followers of the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) were being persecuted by the infidels, they were allowed to migrate to Abyssinia. The poet describes the event in the following lines:

To seek refuge but somewhere else,
Abyssinia was the Prophet's choice.
They may avoid bewildered brain
To breathe in comfort and rid pain.
In bitterness he made this chart,
Sad, sorrowful, morose was his heart. (54)

The Holy Prophet (PBUH) migrated from Makkah to Madina and established a city-state there. He also gave "Charter of Madinah" - the first written constitution. The poet says:

Although refugee from his town
In Medina "Sovereign crown".
He had to form alliance far,
To combat passive active war.
Muhammad God's vicegerent,
People's sovereign, but God's servant. (55)

On the occasion of the Farewell Pilgrimage (Hajjat-al-Wada) the Holy Prophet (PBUH) (peace be upon him) has informed the companions about his demise. The poet describes the prophecy in the following lines:

I know not we shall meet again
In here, like you, I am a man,
Angel of death may soon appear,
I must obey my God to honour. (56)

About the last days of the Prophet (PBUH) Luther says:

Health of the Prophet continued,

To wane. Arabia had been subdued;
Eleventh year of Hijra,
Was severest for Medina;
He got a violent pain in head,
Which with Prophet's illness mingled. (57)

The poet has told about the sad demise of the Prophet of Islam in the following lines:

Now there was violence in his pain,
He was feeling greatest strain;
Declared freedom for all slaves,
Distributed Dirham, Dinars;
Raised his eyes towards the Heaven,
Bade his soul ascend to Heaven. (58)

In short, it can be said that the poet has beautifully versified all important events of the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) which manifests the poet's love and veneration for him.

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